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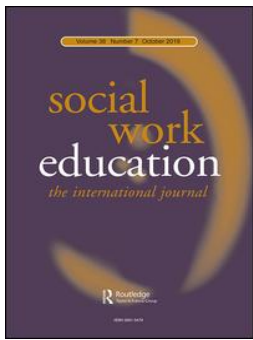
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'It's my time now': the experiences of social work degree apprentices

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ABSTRACT

The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship is the latest addition to an ever-growing proliferation of routes through the professional qualification. Mainly recruiting current social care employees, apprenticeships are broadly structured around a 'day release' model where work-based learning is highly valued and the academic content is compressed but supported through a variety of mechanisms in the workplace and university. This article reports on small-scale research on the characteristics and experiences of the very first cohort of these apprentices at a university in the North West of the UK, during the first two years of their studies. Data gathering overlapped with the move into a period of COVID-19 lockdown. Using a survey method, both qualitative and quantitative data are presented and contextually discussed under four key headings established through thematic analysis: advancement, the one-day apprentice, support and impact. The research reveals a highly qualified and experienced intake of apprentices who feel well supported and that positive impacts are being made on their practice. The article concludes with some observations on what needs to change to maximize the benefits of this qualifying route, whilst also reflecting on its attractiveness to employers in terms of cost and retention.

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Introduction and overview

Social work degree apprenticeships (SWDAs) in the UK are the newest addition to an increasingly diverse and arguably polarising array of routes to gaining the professional qualification. Centered on a primacy of work-based learning, social work apprenticeships are typically founded on a 'day release' approach that compresses face to face taught elements but hugely extends time spent engaged in practice. The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) is an early provider of the social work degree apprenticeships and this article reports on a small-scale piece of research that looked at the experiences of the apprentices during their first two years on the program. These apprenticeships are only available as a generic form of qualification, in line with regulatory body requirements, but perhaps offer the most radical shift yet made in such provision. Generic social work education's first significant milestone in England was arguably in 1972 with the introduction of the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW). This university-

centred award was designed to provide a national standard to address the concerns raised by the Seebohm Report (Dickens, 2011). A perception of inadequacy in social work practice and training has to some extent continued over the past 48 years, resulting in the qualifying program seeing many iterations of the target award, competency frameworks, curriculum and placement requirements. Today in England there are now a plethora of qualifying routes into social work ranging from traditional university-based degrees to fast track schemes and most recently the Degree Apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships have a long history in England and are traditionally associated with skills development for trades such as hairdressing and roles within the construction industry. The Richard Review aimed to raise the public 'regard' for apprenticeships (Richard, 2012, p. 6) by linking them to higher academic awards such as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. He argued that the partnership of an apprenticeship with academic status 'signals to the world that this person has accomplished something real and meaningful' (Richard, 2012, p. 9). More recently, degree apprenticeships were created to focus on areas where higher-level skills were found to be particularly needed (Office for Students, 2019). They were introduced in the Government's 2015 apprenticeship reforms, which also created the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFA) which is an employer-led independent organization designed to deliver central policy in this area, with a Board appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. The apprenticeships reform aimed to place employers in the driving seat (Tovey, 2017) permitting them to design apprenticeship standards and assessments within Trailblazer groups. The apprentice standards are specific to a profession/role and set out what an apprentice must know and be able to do at the end of their learning period. The assessment is designed to demonstrate that an apprentice can 'do their job', are competent and 'can apply their skills in different contexts' (Richard, 2012, p. 8). The Social Work Apprenticeship standards and End Point Assessment designed by the Social Work Trailblazer group were approved by The IFA in 2018 (IFA Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education., 2018). At the launch, Hanrahan (a workforce development manager at Norfolk County Council), Head of the Trailblazer Group, said:

The Trailblazer group set out to design an apprenticeship that would provide a new opportunity for career progression for high quality candidates within the social care workforce. It'll help employers deliver their workforce plans, support employee retention and enable the apprenticeship levy to target an important skills gap. (University Vocational Awards Council, 2018: np)

This may suggest a somewhat inward-looking route for professional status rather than a learning opportunity for all, with the emphasis firmly on employers' engineering progression from care roles for suitable prospective professionals. Clearly a grow your own approach has significant advantages, but there are perhaps some disadvantages. McNicoll, for example, drew upon voices from the social work profession and from the British Association of Social Workers who expressed concern that the social work apprenticeship was parochial and apprentices would be trained to work for their own employer thereby missing out on a richer and broader educational opportunity (McNicoll, 2017). Although the apprenticeship requires the apprentice to have experience in two settings, the duration of time spent in the other workplace is not outlined nor is it required that it takes place in a different organization (outside of the apprentice's usual employer). Alternatively,

Barron is more positive about higher apprenticeships and describes them as a 'blessing in disguise' because they increase the capability of staff and apprentices are likely to be retained more than placement students (Barron, 2018, p. 44). This may well prove to be helpful to social work where retention is an ongoing, longstanding challenge (see for example, British Association of Social Workers, 2014; Stone, 2016).

The social work apprentice is funded through the apprenticeship levy scheme whereby any employer whose wage bill is over £3million per year, has an additional tax that is paid into a levy account and this fund can *only* be spent on apprenticeship fees. Employers can spend up to £23,000 per Social Work Degree apprentice from their levy account and, should a university charge more than this, then the employer funds the additional amount themselves. Levy paying employers are therefore drawing upon their 'own' money which has been put aside and they are wise to spend it because any levy money unspent at the end of the year is turned over to the government. It is also important to note that the levy is, by nature 'generic' and therefore employers need to make choices about how many of which type of apprenticeship they will spend against. Social work degree apprenticeships are therefore in direct competition with a wide range of other apprenticeships and workforce needs within the typical local authority and as a relatively costly (degree) apprenticeship they can quickly accumulate a large share of the levy account.

There is financial support for those employers who are non-levy payers with some qualifying for the full £23,000 course fee being met by the government and some employers can also receive a £1,000 incentive from the government. Therefore, the government may, in a small number of cases pay £24,000 for one social work apprentice but this amount is roughly less than half of the cost of both the average Step Up and Fast Track student. Although employers can draw upon the apprenticeship levy it is important to recognize the other resource implications in terms of supporting an apprentice. Employers are required to pay the salary for the duration of the apprenticeship, provide a mentor, facilitate practice learning placements without eligibility to claim the daily placement fee (which is payable for other social work student placements) and they must afford the apprentice off the job learning time equal to 20% of their working week. Barron claims that the time spent outside of the workplace involved in the off the job elements is balanced by the longer term benefits received through the upskilling of staff (Barron, 2018).

However, there is no insight yet available as to how the Social Work Apprenticeship compares to other programs in terms of improving the caliber of the workforce or retention of graduate. Nor has there been any previous published research available to illuminate how the social work apprenticeship is being experienced by employers or apprentices.

The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) was the first learning provider to receive approval by the Health and Care Professions Council (the regulating body at that time) and the Institute of Apprentices, to deliver and assess the SWDA. UCLan enrolled 36 apprentices in the academic year 2018/2019 and a further 45 the following academic year. Of the 651 social work apprentices enrolled in the first two academic years of delivery in England, 13% are studying at UCLan (Department for Education, 2020). As the first and largest provider of social work apprenticeships, UCLan was well placed to commence research to generate insights and new knowledge about how the apprenticeship is being experienced by all stakeholders; employers, apprentices, mentors and academic staff. This article is written

as UCLan is about to enter its third year of delivery of the SWDA and this seems an opportune moment to pause and reflect on these experiences and examine what apprentices think about the SWDA so far.

Methodology

Broadly speaking this research has been conducted through an action research approach (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). When reflecting on how we might structure our approach some key elements were clear: first, that the setting was higher education and was engaged with pedagogical issues, second that the issue under examination also involved social work/care organizations and third, that this was more than simple evaluation and was about change and development of this new approach to social work education. We were struck by Norton's definition:

Pedagogical action research involves using a reflective lens through which to look at some pedagogical issue or problem . . . with the dual aim of modifying practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge (Norton, 2019, p. 1)

The research this article reports on is one part of a mixed methods approach to examine the experience of social work degree apprentices which has gained ethical approval from the University of Central Lancashire. The initial, wider project examined the experiences of a range of stakeholders and the authors plan to revisit all respondents further on in the process. However, this paper focuses exclusively on a series of survey results from the apprentices. The 'Online Survey' tool (formerly known as Bristol Online Survey) was employed due to its features, GDPR compliance and accessibility. The survey schedule was constructed to examine various demographic characteristics, together with a range of qualitative as well as quantitative responses to allow some richness to the data. The apprentices, as central respondents, were familiar with the online milieu as it is so central to their learning experience and, of course, professional roles. Using this survey tool, we were able to easily connect with a full sample of all apprentices ($n = 81$). Other respondents (not discussed in this article) included employers ($n = 27$), mentors ($n = 68$) and academic staff ($n = 16$) all engaged with the UCLan SWDA degree. Respondents were, of course, aware of the nature of the research and were only able to participate in an anonymous way.

There are a range of problems associated with survey research in general (see for example, Ruel et al., 2016; Weisberg, 2008; Wolf et al., 2016) and our understanding of this limited sample survey approach leads us to state clearly that we are not seeking to make generalizable conclusions in our analysis of the data. Rather we are engaged in the presentation of our findings and offering some initial reflections in our discussion, as a contribution to an emerging knowledge base around SWDAs in England. We note especially that deeper, qualitative expressions of the experience of being on (or involved with) an SWDA will be examined in forthcoming focus group and individual interview data collection.

Below, we present some descriptive statistical data of key quantitative findings. Findings from qualitative data are also presented having been taken through a familiar route of analysis using principles derived from grounded theory and thematic analysis. Grounded theory, as a 'living, growing, adaptable methodology for generating theoretical understanding of social phenomena' affords us an opportunity for ongoing simultaneous collection and examination of data that suited the wider project (Coghlan & Brydon-

Miller, 2014, p. 388). Within that, our qualitative data were taken as a whole and subjected to a thematic analysis with immersive readings looking for recurring topics, ideas, patterns and themes that might provide an insight into our topic—looking for differences as well as similarities (Allen, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Direct quotes from the data are normally used in a representative manner to illustrate common responses in the exact written words of the (apprentice) respondents. Where we have occasionally used more ‘outlying’ responses this is noted in the text.

In terms of sample, all 81 apprentices enrolled on the Social Work Apprenticeship at UCLan were invited to complete the survey and 29 did, making a response rate of 35%. The survey was open from 28 April 2020 until 29 May 2020. Of the 29 apprentices who completed the survey 34% (n = 10) had been on the apprenticeship program for one year or more at the time of completing the survey and the other 66% (n = 19) fewer than 12 months on the program. Our initial findings are presented below, followed by a discussion and reflection on their content. As part of our analysis a series of themes were identified. Taking an inductive approach, we have sought to build themes from the data and these are used to shape both findings and structure. We will present the following four themes: Advancement, the One-day apprentice, Support and Impact.

Findings

Twenty-four (83%) respondents in the survey self-identified as female, three males and one other. National data suggest that 90% of undergraduate social work students identify as female and 10% male (Skills for Care, 2019). It is interesting to note that in the population of 81 UCLan social work apprentices there are 19 males which again is higher than the national average of 10%. 7% (n=2) considered themselves to have a disability and 93% (n= 27) no disability (no comparable national data found). Twenty-four percent (n = 7) of the participants were aged under 30, 41% (n = 12) were 31–40, with 21% (n = 6) 41–50 and the remaining 14% (n = 4) aged 51–60. Nationally, only 33% of undergraduate recruitment is aged 30 or above—making this a significant cohort difference. Typically, the apprentices described their roles as support workers, care co-ordinators or advisors (working with adults, children and family services, or mental health). However, the position of Head of Service was recorded by one respondent. Six already had a degree and nine had post-graduate level qualifications prior to commencing the social work degree apprenticeship. Interestingly, 10% (n = 3) of respondents had 6 to 8 years of experience and a notable 69% (n = 20) had more than eight years social care experience prior to starting the apprenticeship. We have not been able to gather comparable national data on this but our experience suggests these respondents form a relatively mature and highly experienced cohort. Traditionally, apprenticeships have been seen as a widening participation tool and the Government promotes degree apprenticeships as a way to improve social mobility, however, rather than the apprenticeship policy being a ‘spring board for young people’ it would appear from this evidence that in social work at least, it is a spring board for mature and experienced people (Higher Education Commission, no date:31).

Advancement

The survey asked the apprentices to select their ‘top three’ reasons why they decided to commence social work education when they did. They were presented with 17

different statements to choose from and had the option to add their other reasons if they were not covered within the 17 statements. In descending order from the most common:

I need the social work qualification to advance my career, longer term career goals and aspirations.

I can study and have a salary/wage

I need the social work qualification to advance my career in the near future (applying for a social work role on completion of the program)

I want to learn more/gain knowledge

There are limitations to the responsibilities I hold in my current role and if I get a social work qualification I can continue to work with the same service user/family over a longer period of time (don't need to pass them onto a social worker)

I can do the course without paying tuition fees

This illustrates that the main reasons why the apprentices commenced the social work course when they did relate to advancement of their career, learning and finances. The data suggest that they commenced the course primarily because of the need to obtain a social work qualification to advance their career and enable them to gain more responsibility than is afforded in their current role. As most apprentices are employed as support workers, care co-ordinators or advisors, with six or more years social care experience, it is reasonable to suggest that some may have reached a career ceiling and were not able to advance without a professional qualification.

The 'one-day apprentice'

Of the apprentices who completed the survey 76% (n = 22) reported having a manageable allocation of work and 72% (n = 21) reported that the apprenticeship has not negatively impacted upon their family or private time. However, the qualitative data offer some contradictory evidence that appears to illustrate apprentices experience aspects of the academic component of the apprenticeship as (comparatively) unmanageable and the apprenticeship can negatively impact upon their time. To the question whether they had a manageable allocation of work one strongly agreed, but commented:

I feel I have to sacrifice a lot of my time with my children to study instead. I also commit to staying in the office after work some days, so I can complete my assignments

The following participants all agreed they have a manageable allocation of work but commented on the impact of the apprenticeship:

At times the level of self-completed study is unmanageable due to full time working and personal commitments.

I agree I have a manageable allocation of work currently, but this is a constant battle in supervision to ensure this is the case ... The SWDA has impacted hugely on my family/private life - sometimes negatively - dropping my son off at a friends at 6am ... the weekends that are taken up with study, instead of being with my family ...

Having a strict routine is helpful although it is tiring balancing the demands of both work and study. I enjoy the study so that makes it easier to continue.

Over 93% (n = 27) of the respondents reported enjoying the academic aspects and the qualitative comments illustrate that they see the time they invest as worthwhile:

... these are the things I have to do if I want to succeed in the SWDA and in my future career.

the academic studies are very time consuming but vital.

The data strongly suggest that when asked if they have a manageable workload, the majority of apprentices read this to mean the tasks in the 'workplace' with service users and did not interpret inclusively the 'university' aspects as part of their workload. The 24% of apprentices that scored their workload as unmanageable also compartmentalized workplace activity, university and the impact on private and family time:

Having a full case load of 85, on the job training to complete and essays to constantly write, exams to sit has not made this 1st year easy in anyway. Also, being a full-time carer for my daughter ...

I feel I am unable to cover all aspects of the work required on Blackboard - reading and self-learning, due to the time restrictions upon me. I feel I should have more time allowed by my employer for me to enjoy this learning experience as oppose to me having to work most days to achieve the necessary outcomes.

... unrealistic expectation which can cause a lot of anxiety getting this completed on top of working a 30.5+ hour week with extremely vulnerable and complex people.

Although a small number speak about the demands within the workplace the majority appear to experience the workplace as manageable, and it appears to be the academic elements that are impacting upon private and family time. The dissonance in the data can perhaps be interpreted to suggest that apprentices may associate the university elements as the apprenticeship and workplace as work. This would suggest the respondents see that they are workers most of the time but one day a week they are an apprentice.

Support

The survey asked apprentices about the support they received whilst undertaking the apprenticeship, 90% (n = 26) of apprentices said the support from their Manager, the university liaison tutor and the academic course team was adequate, 89% (n = 26) of apprentices said the support from family was adequate and 83% (n = 24) of apprentices said their mentor & work colleagues support was adequate:

My workplace has completely supported this course ... I am confident I can call on my manager and mentor if necessary

Asked about other sources of support, peer support and digital technology feature strongly in the qualitative data:

My work colleagues are my main source of support along with my manager. My practice educator is very supportive also along with the university lecturers. I feel my colleagues play a much more supportive role than my mentor would have and this has been the case due to COVID 19.

Peer support: a small group of us have a weekly skype seminar to discuss our learning, complete learning tasks together and share worries or anxieties about exams and assignments ... Microsoft teams is a really good way to keep in touch with tutors and have questions answered quickly and easily.

The university have adapted very well, to Covid 19. I still feel I have the support I need, despite the pandemic.

Since the covid-19 situation the increased use of peer support has been vital to ensure I feel connected with the course. There are positives for me in not having to travel ... but I miss the interaction with staff/peers and the seminar work so we are doing this online together which is good.

The survey was designed prior to the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and many respondents commented upon the impact of it upon their experiences. In addition to Blackboard being the main virtual learning environment (VLE), Microsoft Teams is the default university application and it is reassuring to observe a strong view of support and, from this evidence, a good level of satisfaction with on-line formations, structures and delivery of support. The last quote notes the enhanced accessibility of on-line platforms for apprenticeships with lengthy journeys to make.

Impact

It is interesting to note that nearly 90% ($n = 26$) of apprentices have noticed a positive change in their day to day practice with service users as a result of learning during the apprenticeship course. We found no particular correlation between the length of time the apprentice has been on the course and their response as to whether or not they have noticed a positive change. Even those who have been on the program for four months reported a positive change in their practice. One apprentice who had worked in social care for more than 8 years reported:

I have enjoyed the modules I have completed so far and I have gained a lot of knowledge that i am already implementing within my work.

Interestingly, 79% ($n = 23$) of apprentices reported that others had identified a change in their knowledge, skills and/or values relevant to social work. This change appears to be the case even for those who have only been on the apprenticeship for a very short period. Having more responsibility in the workplace appeared to be more pronounced in those who have been on the program longer. All respondents who had been on the program for 12 months said they had been given more responsibility in the workplace, but this drops to less than 50% of those who have been on the course fewer than 12 months.

Given some of the issues surrounding the notion of the 'one-day apprentice' discussed above, it is important to note satisfaction levels for apprentices were uniformly very high. One hundred percent ($n = 29$) of the respondents reported being pleased that they accepted a place and equally, all said they are enjoying the apprenticeship:

I am really enjoying the apprenticeship opportunity.

I am honestly loving every minute of the apprenticeship.

It is a fantastic opportunity and hope that others can also benefit from this route into social work.

Discussion

Advancement

The main reasons why these apprentices commenced the social work course when they did relate to advancement of their career, learning and finances. Indeed, as the Office for Students advise the 'degree apprenticeships provide good value for money for learners, as they pay no tuition fees, incur no debt and receive a wage from their employer' (Office for Students, 2019, p. 2). However, positive possible impact on future earnings scored low within our data and therefore the financial aspects appear to relate to the here and now rather longer-term income. Anecdotally, one of the authors was involved in the recruitment and selection of the apprentices and noted that many of the apprentices used phrases similar to 'it's my time now'. They told of a change in their personal circumstances and caring responsibilities which enabled them up to focus on themselves and to follow their own ambitions. However, in the survey, data none of the participants indicated that a change in caring responsibilities was the main reason as to why they commenced social work education at the time they did.

We noted above the maturity and high levels of experience of the surveyed apprentices. In addition to having a wealth of social care experiences, half of the apprentices had already attained a degree or higher degree level qualifications prior to commencing the social work degree apprenticeship. Despite this wealth of experience and high academic attainment, the professional social work qualification was required to advance their careers. This raises interesting elements for reflection including the effect of a narrow focus on the protected professional title within the allocation of responsibility of organizational structures that provide social care services. Also to consider is how those with extensive experience and proven academic ability are valued with the SWDA. The standards advise that the duration of the social work apprenticeship is typically 36 months and the word 'typically' is particularly relevant to these career determinists who are motivated to obtain the social work qualification. The Education and Skills Funding Agency outline that:

Apprentices should not be spending paid time doing training they do not need, and the apprentice will not have a good experience if they are repeating training. Apprenticeship funding should not be used to pay for, or accredit, existing knowledge, skills and behaviours (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019, np).

This directs attention to the use of the Accreditation and Prior Learning and Experience (APEL) within the SWDA. As part of the initial robust assessment at the onboarding stage, training providers must consider the apprentice's prior learning against the knowledge, skills and behaviors within the apprentice standard. Prior learning includes work experience and prior education, training and qualifications (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019, np). This important initial diagnostic is not only required but is particularly relevant to social work apprentices who typically have extensive experiences within social care and can be highly qualified in parallel subject areas. Accrediting

prior learning can also reduce the demands upon apprentices because they may potentially undertake fewer assessment and shorten the length of time on the program. However, the practice of accrediting prior learning may require a change to usual practice for some social work programs.

In former versions of social work courses, it was highly unusual to pursue accreditation of prior learning for the practice learning elements of the program. As the professional regulator changed from the General Social Care Council to The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) it was advised that 'the existing prohibition on APEL for practice will no longer apply. However APEL for practice is rare in HCPC-approved programs' (TCSW, 2012, p. 39). The HCPC did indeed ask providers to consider accreditation prior learning and take into account 'the relevance and level of the previous learning' but to 'make sure that the applicant provides enough evidence' and advised there 'is no need for you to recognize or give credit for previous learning or experience if you do not consider it appropriate' (HCPC, 2017, p. 14). Social Work England, the current professional regulatory body, has adopted the HCPC standards for 2019 and, at the time of writing had suspended the introduction of its 'new' 2020 standards. But both take an essentially similar approach with the 2019 phrasing requiring an 'effective and appropriate' APEL process (Standard 2.6, Social Work England, 2019) whilst the 2020 requires that an applicant's experience is considered (Standard 1.2 Social Work England, 2020). These are requirements and there is nowhere in the standards or their accompanying guidance that prohibits accreditation against placement days.

Words such as 'effective' and 'appropriateness' are rather elastic and potentially difficult to establish, resulting in a common practice that largely seems only to accredit prior learning if the applicant has already successfully completed assessment on another social work program. If the applicant has not previously been a social work learner, establishing the relevance of experiences, in-house training or academic credit on a different degree is problematic. However, to comply with ESFA rules, apprentice providers must undertake a full assessment against the social work apprentice standards for each apprentice and must not assume that all apprentices will undertake all elements of the apprenticeship program. We feel that this is an important issue that needs much fuller consideration as one might argue that apprenticeship courses in particular need to change their course curriculum and design to more overtly facilitate APEL as opposed to simply converting the more 'traditional' structures. In turn this raises further questions about what, if any, limits might be placed on APEL. University regulations typically limit the number of credits 'APEL'd' to two-thirds of the whole course (i.e. two years of a three-year degree). The Quality Assurance Agency guidelines (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2004) focus on the importance of academic judgment within a transparent and fair process but set no such limits. Put together, not one of these procedural issues prohibits an overdue significant 'sea-change' of approach to accrediting prior learning in social work education. Whilst this may lead to further cost efficiencies it is important that we retain a sense of our role as gatekeepers of the profession, ensuring the quality of the graduate from the apprentices must take precedence over fiscal costs.

The one-day apprentice

Of the 29 apprentices who completed the survey, the quantitative data show that most (n = 22) reported having a manageable allocation of work and that the apprenticeship

had not negatively impacted upon their family/private time. However, the qualitative data presents a different picture in that the apprenticeship does negatively impact private and family time and this appears to relate to the academic component rather than the allocation of case work. Although some apprentices draw attention to the complexity of their casework, it is seemingly the academic component which is seen as the most challenging and apprentices are not afforded adequate time to engage with the academic requirements. The inference is that apprentices may experience and perceive their tasks in the workplace as their paid work and being very experienced social care professionals that is manageable. In addition to their four days doing their 'usual job' they have one day a week when they are an apprentice doing academic work. Apprenticeship programs need to foster the view that one is an apprentice five days a week.

This construction of the 'one-day apprentice' does not, arguably, align to the *raison d'être* of the degree apprenticeship which requires the coming together of a 'high-quality vocational and academic program' (Crawford-Lee & Moorwood, 2019, p. 135). Indeed social work's signature pedagogy also draws together that which occurs under the direction of educators in the classroom and in supervised practice (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Wayne et al., 2010). Larrison and Korr (2013) explore the need to deconstruct long-standing dichotomies of theory and practice and advocate a holistic approach to learning. Degree apprentices spend 80% of their contracted hours in the workplace and this ought to create opportunity for rich integrated learning and the practical enactment of knowledge. These are early days for the SWDA but our evidence suggests that SWDA's need to work harder to develop an understanding that the workplace is a setting for learning and the demonstration of competence. Contractual arrangements, commitment statements, organizational structures and models of support (such as liaison tutors) need to work in harmony to foster this understanding and bridging between the university and workplace. Like Boitel and Fromm we advocate the use of learning contracts to facilitate explicit understanding between all stakeholders within the apprenticeship (Boitel & Fromm, 2014).

Support

Before reflecting specifically on learning contracts in the context of support, we will consider the issue more broadly. The research asked apprentices about the support they receive whilst undertaking the apprenticeship, and the majority of respondents reported that they received adequate support from their manager, mentor, family and university staff. When asked about any other sources of support, digital technology and peer support feature strongly in their responses. The survey was launched in April 2020 and by then all face to face teaching had been stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All 'on campus' teaching and learning had immediately transferred to a mix of synchronous (live sessions) and A-synchronous (recorded) online learning predominantly using the Microsoft Teams platform. Participants praised the university for the way it adapted and maintained support. The apprentices also use digital technologies to maintain support with peers which they placed great value on commenting that:

Aa small group of us have a weekly skype seminar to discuss our learning, complete learning tasks together and share worries or anxieties . . . Microsoft teams is a really good way to keep in touch with tutors and have questions answered quickly and easily.

But also noting that;

Since the covid-19 situation, the increased use of peer support has been vital to ensure I feel connected with the course. ... but I miss the interaction with staff/peers and the seminar work - so we are doing this online together which is good.

Although it was established as an emergency provision, the experiences of connecting remotely have been, at least initially, positive. There is opportunity here to consider how digital technologies can further be embedded into the curriculum going forward. In addition to it being a medium for teaching it can also seek to increase the contact between apprentices to facilitate peer support and for them to share learning materials. However, like all of those who have worked from home during COVID-19 it is important to consider the availability of a working space, equipment and a reliable internet. Afrouz and Crisp (2020) synthesize the literature around on-line social work education and found evidence that online methods enhance diversity and equity amongst students and did not impact negatively on students' satisfaction in comparison with on-campus delivery. They conclude with a challenge that, 'this is the time to move from dichotomous thinking of online and face-to-face teaching in social work and attempt to provide excellent learning to social work regardless of the mode of delivery' (Afrouz & Crisp, 2020, p. 11).

To further enhance support there is evidence here to support the development of a pre-apprentice program delivered in partnership between the employer and university. This supportive program can identify support networks, ensure digital readiness, and provide a flavor of the academic level and commitment required. Operating a buddy system enables more experienced learners to support those new to study, and again digital platforms can be drawn upon to maintain this supportive relationship. One of the more visible arenas in which these issues of support and organizational learning cultures are the learning agreement.

A learning agreement is already incorporated into all apprenticeships because it is part of a plethora of documentation required by the apprenticeships funding body. Rather than seeing the learning agreement as simply a form to complete, we argue that it ought to be embraced as a framework to discuss expectations, support needs and commitment by all stakeholders. Stakeholders include the apprentice, employer (including the mentor) and university. This agreement is formally reviewed quarterly throughout the duration of the apprenticeship. Roberts et al. (2019) draw attention to this effective tripartite working but advise that key roles such as the mentor and 'employer liaison tutor' are new and not yet fully understood (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 212). It is the experience of the authors that the liaison tutor is indeed a key player in social work's signature pedagogy, forging strong effective linking of academia and practice. They have visible and regular presence in the workplace, supporting employers with recruitment, delivering mentor training, overseeing all of the apprentice documentation and importantly monitoring progress against the apprenticeship standards. The liaison tutor must actively guide those within the workplace to embrace their role as facilitators of learning. Consolidating the workplace as an educational space will help to create a whole time, rather than a one-day apprenticeship. There is opportunity here for a pedagogical reawakening through the coming together of workplace and academia to form a collaborative learning partnership where both having equal responsibility to facilitate learning and professional development. But it seems there are significant shifts to make

on this journey both in terms of strategic understanding, organizational culture and pedagogy on both sides.

Impact

One hundred percent of the respondents in the research reported being pleased that they had accepted a place on the apprenticeship and 100% said they are enjoying the apprenticeship. Although the qualitative data illustrate that the academic component of the apprenticeship is negatively impacting upon family and private time of some apprentices, this does not appear to impact on their perception that the apprenticeship is the right thing for them to be doing. The purpose of the degree apprentices is to increase the capability of staff (Barron, 2018) and an impressive 90% of the apprentices that took part in this research have already noticed a positive change in their day to day practice with service users as a result of learning during the apprenticeship. Even those who have been on the program only for a few months also reported seeing a positive impact. Seventy-nine percent of apprentices reported that others had identified a change in their knowledge, skills and/or values that are relevant to social work. The main reasons why the apprentices commence the program were for career progression and all respondents who had been on the apprenticeship for 12 months or more have been given more responsibility in the workplace, this drops to less than 50% of those who have been on the course fewer than 12 months. Therefore, it is anticipated that the longer they are on the program the more positive the impact will be on the social work profession. Indeed degree apprenticeships were introduced ‘with the dual aim of improving productivity and social mobility’ both of which resonate with the findings from this research project (Higher Education Commission, no date:2). The finding that all apprentices are pleased they have this opportunity and it appears to be positively impacting upon their practice is a cause for celebration within the sector.

We can briefly pause to reflect on issues of preparation and impact comparing with the latest data on other social work qualifying routes including fast track programs. Interestingly, the most recent Frontline (cohort 4) students are less likely than ‘traditional’ route students to feel adequately prepared for practice. Perhaps more tellingly, three quarters of Frontline’s cohort 1 students had left their original employers within 36 months of registering and some 29% had left the profession altogether (Scourfield et al., 2020). Impact cannot be made if you are no longer working there. Apprenticeships, by definition, draw on a localized, committed cohort of employees that we confidently predict will have stronger retention profiles. In the summer of 2018 a document inviting providers to tender for Frontline advised of the intention to train between 700 and 900 social workers. Excluding VAT, the amount per student was between £71,428 to £55,000. Baginsky and Manthorpe estimate that the cost per Step Up To Social Work trainee is approximately £53,000 and like Frontline this money comes from the public purse (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2016). Although some students on traditional social work courses may pay the full tuition fee (or a contribution towards this) there are additional government contributions by way of bursaries, student loans, HFCE funding and daily placement fees to pay for practice learning opportunities. Taking into consideration all of the costs associated with all of the different routes to qualify as a social worker, the apprenticeship in our view can be seen as fiscally advantageous to the public purse.

Conclusion

Social Work Degree Apprenticeships offer the potential to make a significant impact on the existing balance of entry routes to the profession. This small-scale research reports on the very first cohort of apprentices on their first two years of learning and finds them satisfied with their learning, the support structures and with extremely promising observations on the positive impact this route is having on direct practice. However, it may be that to fully embrace the potential for this route, there is learning for both employer and higher education institution to be developed. Employers might need to develop their understanding of the educative role they must adopt, whilst universities need to develop structures that more easily submit to making the most of the significant experience and academic strength apprentices bring. Evidence is growing that this is a cost-effective and impactful route that has the potential to strengthen retention in the profession. In a pleasing synchronicity, just as these apprentices during the recruitment to the program talk of it being ‘their time now’, so too it seems that now is the time for the social work apprenticeship program.

Disclosure statement

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